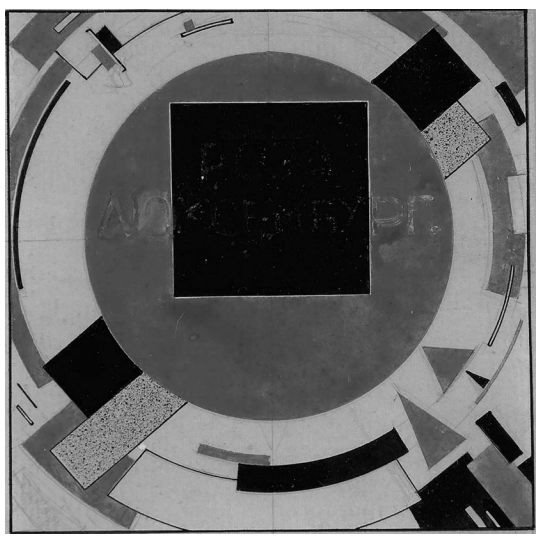
The negativity of capital

The fate of the dialectic after the failure of Marxism

Mike Atkinson



El Lissitzky, *Untitled (Rosa Luxemburg)* (1920–21)

Bourgeois society and the dialectic

BOURGEOIS SOCIETY FIRST emerges in the Renaissance, but finds its political realization with the revolt of the Third Estate.[1] "Society," according to the Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno quoting J. C. Bluntschli, "is a concept of the Third Estate.[2] " They set about conceptualizing and politically realizing changes that had already come to pass in emergent bourgeois society's outstripping of traditional civilization and its Great Chain of Being.

Labor, the association and activity of civil society that binds it together, was, for bourgeois thinkers, conceived as an exercise in freedom, the means of its realization and the emancipatory potential granted by society. Labor was taken to be the means of social transformation, the freedom not simply to be, but to become. For bourgeois thinkers, the social dynamic, the transformative potential of labor freed from feudal fetters was one of increasing perfectibility: the perfectibility of freedom through the corruption of and distancing from real human nature, as in Rousseau's profoundly dialectical conception, and the growing maturation and enlightenment of society.

History for Hegel, the apotheotic bourgeois philosopher, was precisely the history of the progressive unfolding and coming to consciousness of freedom. He equated the idea of progress with the dialectical movement of society itself.[3] Thus, bourgeois society discovered history, its own historicity, and therefore its own potential for self-conscious self-transformation. For the first time, humanity was able to understand itself in the present through the lens of progress, of freedom; the present related to itself through its relationship with history, seeing itself as intended in but no longer restricted by or identical with its own past. It is in this way that the past becomes historical. Where the present for premodern civilizations was a relation to itself through the cyclical reproduction of what had apparently always been and what must always be — passage through time as the process of preserving an essentially static condition — the present for modern, bourgeois civilization was seen as the site of the potential for transformation.

The notion of the withering away of the state, for example, associated so strongly today with Marxism, was an idea that emerged in radical bourgeois thought and was conceived of as a real possibility. In an interview with Platypus member D. L. Jacobs, David MacGregor, author of *The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx* (1984), *Hegel, Marx, and the English State* (1992), and *Hegel and Marx after the Fall of Communism* (1998), remarks that he was surprised to find that "when [Hegel] was about 23," he and the poet Hölderlin "had decided that . . . the state would disappear and be replaced by poetry."[4]

This emergent consciousness of freedom was bound up with the apparently unfettered productive capacity of mankind. This, they thought, had the potential to at the least considerably shorten the hours allotted to labor, and even to realize the principle more commonly associated with Marxism of: from each according to his ability; to each according to his need. As Adam Smith poetically describes it in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776):

> In the first fire-engines [steam engines], a boy was constantly employed to open and shut alternately the communication between the boiler and the cylinder, according as the piston either ascended or descended. One of those boys, who loved to play with his companions, observed that, by tying a string from the handle of the valve which opened this communication to another part of the machine, the valve would open and shut without his assistance, and leave him at liberty to divert himself with his play-fellows. One of the greatest improvements that has been made upon this machine, since it was first invented, was in this manner the discovery of a boy who wanted to save his own labour.[5]

But when we look around today, it is difficult to say, with Hegel, that history is progress in the consciousness of freedom, and that the "slaughter-bench of history" is therefore meaningful. Instead of perfecting freedom, the history of capitalism seems instead to be the history of perfecting domination, with emancipation left unrealized, and past failures seeming only to ruffle the fabric of the progress of the victors, of the ruling class. Not freedom, but capital, is the culmination of world history as domination, and the object of the labors of mankind — although it also expresses its potential overcoming.

Rather than being yet another form of exploitation by a privileged group, capitalism bespeaks domination by a reified — that is, "thingified" — and anonymous social dynamic that is the product and aim of labor. When we talk about capital, we are not talking about money, or wealth, or capitalists, but a contradictory, self-undermining social relation that in turn dominates the society that produces it. We still live in bourgeois society, but reproduced in capitalist form. Capitalism is the self-contradiction, the self-negation of bourgeois society, through its process of realization, through its paradoxical historical dynamic.

Socialism and Marxism

Utopian socialism was borne out of the development of bourgeois society and the advent of the Industrial Revolution, with machine production revealing new emancipatory possibilities and the apparent injustice of bourgeois social relations. Utopian socialism was a phenomenon of bourgeois society, of its development; so too was the Left.

It was these early pangs of crisis and contradiction, the yet-unrealized potential of bourgeois society and its revolt, along with the concomitant demands for the "social republic" made by the emergent industrial working class and the associated socialist movements, that the young Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels set out to critically investigate. Marx was the foremost critic of socialism.

Through their critique of the utopian socialists as a phenomenon and symptom of bourgeois society in capitalism, in crisis, Marx and Engels developed "scientific" socialism: the discovery of the conditions of possibility and necessity for socialism in capitalism itself. In the developments they were witnessing first hand, including the emergence of the Left, Marx and Engels discovered that the dynamic of bourgeois society itself was tending towards the necessity of its own transcendence. Capitalism compels socialization.

Bourgeois society was to be a society of free laborers, each owning their own means of production and the product of their labor. Labor was the first property. The idea of private property was derived from labor rather than set up against it, and was conceived as a means not of domination and exploitation, but of emancipation for the laboring commoners from the unjust expropriation of their labor by the clergy and aristocracy. But it was becoming clear to Marx and Engels by the 1840s that the dynamic of bourgeois society was instead producing a new social class — the first social class as we understand the concept today: the proletariat.[6]

As far as bourgeois society is concerned, the proletariat, the subjective form of labor sans property, labor estranged from its product as capital, as a commodity, is a contradiction in terms. This is why Marx, after the liberal economist and historian Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi, uses the term that once referred to a social class of propertyless Roman citizens. The opposing bourgeoisie, then, the owners of industrial capital, were what Marx termed the non-working owners, the character-masks of capital as against labor. The class of the proletariat is not only a contradiction in terms; it is the living self-negation of bourgeois society, produced from out of its own dynamic, to which the proletariat is not external, but integral.

The proletariat is not only the negation of capitalism as a fixed and static phenomenon, but drives the continued and abortive self-abolition of capitalism through the production of surplus value that domination by capital demands. It therefore negates itself as a commodity. The increased productive capacity achieved during the Industrial Revolution undermined the social value of the labor of the individual worker, making workers, but not work, superfluous.[7]

All of the above describes the proletariat "in itself," its "economic" activity. Marx and Marxism, through enacting the immanent dialectical critique of bourgeois society and its political economy,[8] embodied the consciousness of its necessarily transitory character, of the necessity of its overcoming, and of the self-abolition of the proletariat as that class's historical task: in short, the consciousness of the workers' movement, in which "proletarian" and "class" became political categories.

Bourgeois social relations had become a fetter on the productive capacity of humanity. Marx recognized in capital a problem in history *sui generis*, and identified the first crisis of overproduction in human history, bringing with it new possibilities, for both emancipation and domination. Proletarianized labor undermines and devalues itself through its own labor, its own social activity. The proletariat in itself unconsciously enacts its self-abolition without realizing it politically — its task as a self-conscious class, a class for itself — and therefore without overcoming it. We suffer from our own unrealized potential freedom.

Bourgeois society in capitalism has forgotten that the aim of production was to be freedom in transformation, the freedom to become. Instead, humanity has come to serve capital. Capital in the form of industrial capital becomes not a means of social transformation but the end goal of production. Means and ends are reversed, and bourgeois society

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181

About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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Is capitalism Epicurean — and socialism Stoical?

A rejoinder to Benjamin Studebaker on political disturbance and social freedom

Chris Cutrone

3 Whither socialism? Mamdani and the Left

Mamdani and the Left

Mitchel Cohen, Melvyn Dubofsky, Daniel Lazare, and Sebastian LM

1 The negativity of capital

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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open

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Whither socialism?

Mamdani and the Left

Mitchel Cohen, Melvyn Dubofsky, Daniel Lazare, and Sebastian LM

On September 26, 2025, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a panel at New York University on socialism, New York City mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani, and the Left. The speakers were Mitchel Cohen (writer, activist, poet, former chair WBAI-FM Local Station Board, Brooklyn Greens, Red Balloon Collective), Daniel Lazare (author of The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution is Paralysing Democracy *(1996), his writing appears in* Permanent Revolution Blog, *the* Weekly Worker, *and the* Platypus Review*), Sebastian LM (member of the Young Democratic Socialists of America at NYU, Mamdani campaign worker), and Melvyn Dubofsky (Professor Emeritus of History and Sociology at Binghamton University, author of* American Labor Since the New Deal *(1971) and* Industrialism and the American Worker, 1865–1920 *(1975)), who appeared over Zoom. Platypus member Erin Hagood moderated the panel. An edited transcript follows.*[1]

Introduction

While Zohran Mamdani's surprise victory in the New York Democratic mayoral primary has been touted as an unprecedented achievement for the American Left, it did not fall out of the proverbial coconut tree. Mamdani has approvingly cited the "sewer socialists" of the early 20th century, who came out of the Second International Socialist Party of America (SPA) as a model. Some on the Left point to New Deal Republican mayor Fiorello LaGuardia as an aspiration for Leftist municipal politics. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has been involved in electoral politics since the 80s, and member David Dinkins was elected mayor of New York in 1990. What lessons can the Left today take from these projects, and how ought they inform our approach to Mamdani?

But perhaps it is not primarily a question of socialist municipal politics. Democratic Party strategists have followed Mamdani's campaign closely, even as Leftists across the U.S. and abroad have heralded it as the first stirrings of a new Leftist politics. Is Mamdani's campaign an audition for the new Democratic Party anti-Trumpism?

Ought we think of a Mamdani victory as an achievement unto itself, or rather would it pose new and potentially confounding questions for a politically constituted Left? What would it mean for the Left to remain politically activated under Mamdani under Trump? Is Mamdani the alternative to fellow New Yorker (and first President to hail from the city since Teddy Roosevelt) Donald Trump, the head of the new resistance to Trump, or an attempt — self-conscious or not — to constitute the Left wing of the new political order which Trump has inaugurated?

Opening remarks

Mitchel Cohen: In the film *On the Waterfront* (1954), Terry Malloy, played by Marlon Brando, fights his way through the union bureaucracies, fighting against corruption. At the end, after he's beaten up and he wins the moral victory, he meets the capitalist in charge of the whole enterprise on the docks, and this whole thing ends with the capitalist going: "Alright! Back to work!"[2] That was seen as a victory for Malloy, and all the others, and it's shocking. I wonder if that's the same thing that's going to happen with Zohran and other socialists, liberals, and progressives, unless we attack the system in some way.

Mamdani and DSA consider themselves part of the continuation of the Second International, which reached its height in the U.S. and Europe in the early 20th century. Its most important feature was its support for World War I. In September 1915, in Zimmerwald, Switzerland, Lenin, Trotsky, and Rosa Luxemburg broke with imperialism and the so-called socialists all over Europe, condemned the War, and said they refused to send working-class people to kill and be killed for the benefit of capital and the nation-states it controls.[3] The question of war and imperialism split the Second International apart. Has the DSA broken from that history, Or was it all just in the distant past, and we can forget about it? What role does that have on municipal elections?

Mamdani's importance is his break with the Democratic Party hierarchy, especially over the question of Palestine. The Second International always torpedoed our challenges to the fascist state of Israel, and provided the cover that liberals — in the name of socialism — present as a rationalization for furthering capitalist exploitation and expropriation. This was a complete misreading of Marx by Leszek Kołakowski and others. It's just wrong on every level, morally and historically.

In the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels offered assertions about the role of communists: they were to represent the interest of the revolutionary movement as a whole, as opposed to its immediate top trade, electoral, or national interests. They are to bring out the international dimension in every local struggle, and they are to establish a political organization embodying the most advanced consciousness of the working class — not one that is separated from it. Yet, there's been something missing from the socialist movement in the United States. All these years, we've been trying to raise others' consciousness, to get them to say, "yes, I'm a socialist." Suppose we have millions who consider themselves socialists — what do we do?

Lenin was considered an anarchist by others in the Second International; it's hard to believe today, when there's a fight between Leninism and anarchism. And yet, most anarchists share key assumptions with Lenin about the role of revolutionary organization. Daniel Lazare might take issue with this: there's a positive, almost utopian assertion by Lenin that people can do something to change the circumstances of their lives and their conditions. Nothing is predetermined. A great deal concerns how they organize themselves to bring about a socialist future. The Second International, for instance, moaned that conditions weren't right for a truly popular uprising against WWI, when millions of people were being slaughtered throughout Europe. In 1968, the Communist Party in France sabotaged the wave of mass strikes and direct action across the country under the pretext that objective conditions were not ripe for socialism while people were being murdered. How are they seeing that?

Was the working class organized to dramatically change its situation? Almost always not. Workers are left with the option to lobby the state, and through their unions lobby their employers for reforms within the overall capitalist structure, which will sabotage even those efforts, as we're seeing now with Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, minimum wage, etc. In the case of WWI, the parties comprising the Second International, hoping to share in the booty should their country win, endorsed the militarist action of their ruling class, while denouncing the carnage of others and providing cannon-fodder for the War, just as they do in every war from within the ranks of the workers. They stake their hopes for trade-union victories for their workers and their unions on the defeat of other workers and other unions, at home and abroad. How to get out of that capitalist trap? This is not a rhetorical question: how does electing a DSA member, an explicit continuator of the Second International, as he himself has said, move us towards socialism, especially since capitalism will do everything possible to set worker against worker and defund and destroy Mamdani's efforts?

What differentiates Mamdani's program? What worker can disagree with the few things he's proposed, as far as they go, which is not far at all? What's different from former mayors Bill de Blasio, David Dinkins, or other liberals? Let's not forget that de Blasio was, 30 years ago, campaign coordinator for Hillary Clinton, who was portrayed as a Leftist — we can all laugh together. How does the election of an avowed socialist make socialism happen? We're limited to only bread-and-butter demands, wage demands, and working-condition demands. We're not making demands on the capitalists that we work for. We're not calling for the shut down of the pollution of the Hudson River. That's a job for workers. We must break with all existing capitalist contracts, including the social contract that allows for unions. Instead of shutting down production, which we do on strikes, open it up to workers' control. Every issue must convey the organizational capacity to make it happen, and not just appeal to those in power to do it on our behalf. This would be a fundamental rewrite of the rules of trade unionism that the Second International always upheld. They will try to bust up Mamdani and any sincere socialist efforts.

Can we use state power to fund and expand communes and collectives? This was Hugo Chavez's great contribution as written about in last month's *Monthly Review* as part of the socialist structure and the transition to socialism.[4] These differ from Nicaragua's and Cuba's committees, because those were mostly for distribution of goods, not for production. That system is already pitting workers in gardens against workers needing housing. Workers don't want to be poisoned, but they're willing to allow a certain amount of poison, and so forth. Can these communes be instituted in New York City? A mayor can do good things by being a socialist. The point is to organize the working class beyond where it is now, into communities as the basis for democratic control of the society. When the pharmaceutical industry, for instance, mandates that workers be inoculated with an experimental drug or lose their jobs, what will be the position of the new socialist mayor? The mayor will try to make decisions facing huge capitalist and market pressures; can this even be done electorally without uprooting the entire capitalist system, and if so, how?

Those are some unanswered questions; they will move to crush socialism if Mamdani and the city apparatus are not building those structural forms now. Even deeper, fascism will come and take us over. There's my charge to Mamdani's regime. I like him and the things he's putting forth. Who doesn't want to ride for free on the bus? But it has to go a lot deeper than that, and structures have to be built that will defend socialist policies and programs against the capitalists who will try to tear it down.

Daniel Lazare: I'm glad you brought up the beginning of WWI. I agree that it was an incredible betrayal of the working-class movement. These questions are never simple. For example, a leader of the French Socialist Party said that if they hadn't voted for war credits, their own members would have lynched them in the streets because the war fever was running so high and Germany was attacking France. What I take from that is that there come times when you've got to do the unpopular thing; you've got to break with popular opinion, party opinion, the prevalent political opinion on the Left, and you've got to stand athwart and challenge it.

That brings me to Mamdani. There's been enthusiasm over his primary victory; people are excited, and everybody is hailing it as the dawn of a new era. Finally, Trump is getting his socialist resistance. I'm skeptical because I've seen this all before. Just cast your mind back a decade and a half. What have we been through? 2011: Occupy Wall Street. 2016: Bernie Sanders. 2017: the pussy-hat protests, and then the #MeToo movement. 2018: the rise of "The Squad": Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayana Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib. And 2020: the rise of BLM. At each moment, there was this popular outpouring: "Isn't it great! The revolution has arrived; let's just plunge into this latest struggle!" What has been the result? We are in the middle of the Trump era, the entire world — as far away as Nepal — is rushing to the Right. People have lost faith in the very idea of democratic self-government, and they are looking to strong-men like Trump to do their thinking for them.

Abroad, 2012–15 saw the rise of SYRIZA in Greece,[5] a coalition of Left-wing parties that ended up collapsing when they authorized a referendum on the latest EU debt bailout package. The vote was 61–39 "No," and the SYRIZA government still approved the package. 2015 saw the rise of Podemos in Spain. They were the third-largest party in the Spanish Parliament, and they wound up collapsing. 2015 saw the rise of Jeremy Corbyn. In 2019, the Labour Party suffered its worst defeat since the 1930s, and Corbyn was forced to resign.

Just now, at the same time that Leftists are waxing enthusiastic over Mamdani, Corbyn and Zarah Sultana are forming a new party which is provisionally called Your Party. When they announced the plans, they got 800,000 subscribers in a matter of days; it shows a mass outpouring of enthusiasm and support like we've seen repeatedly over the last 15 years. Now, Your Party is falling apart because Corbyn and Sultana are at loggerheads. Two weeks ago in London, Tommy Robinson, the head of the English Defence League,[6] organized a protest. The term fascist is overused, especially with regard to Israel, by the way, but Tommy Robinson looks like he is becoming the true article. His protest may have drawn as many as 300,000 people. There were 10,000 counterprotestors organized by Say No to Racism, a Socialist Workers Party (UK) creation. They had to be protected by the police! They were outnumbered 30 to 1! So, Your Party, the new Left-wing party, is dying unborn, dissolving in petty bickering, because their politics are totally fractured. Meanwhile, the radical Right is putting together the biggest far-Right demonstration in Britain since the 1930s.[7] It just goes to show the true picture out there.

Mamdani's primary-election results are really fascinating. Among college-educated voters, Mamdani won 62–38. Among those without college education, Andrew Cuomo won 61–39! That closely mirrors what happened in 2024 between Trump and Kamala Harris: Trump won the vote of those who had less than four years of college education and Harris won those who were more educated. That's why Trump is seen as a stand-in for the working and middle class. Mamdani is replicating the same pattern we saw in 2024, which led to Trump and disaster! This kind of middle-class socialism winds up alienating the working class and driving it into the arms of the Right. Now, Cuomo is not a Rightist like Trump, but he's still somewhat to the Right. What's happening with Mamdani is much less impressive than what people are letting on. We see that, rather than breaking up the old patterns, he is in some ways reinforcing them. He's advancing a kind of middle-class, semi-liberal, semi-quasi-socialism and he's not winning over the workers.

What should Mamdani do? I presume he's going to win. As Mamdani takes office, Trump will bulldoze through. He will love it. He will be able to just punish New York and punish Mamdani. Is Mamdani mobilizing the working class against that? He's not; he's meeting with Governor Kathy Hochul. It's completely underwhelming. It's a continuation of the impotent Left-liberal politics that we have seen since the financial crisis in 2008. It's going to lead to more disappointment. Just as the French Socialist Party made a bad mistake in 1914, that liberals, Leftists, and socialists are making a bad mistake if they suspend their judgment and flock uncritically to the Mamdani banner.

Sebastian LM: I became an organizer when I was 14, before I became a socialist. I'm from Harlem, and I became a socialist because of the material conditions. We're talking about the working class here abstractly, but we see that what is appealing to voters is this rhetoric of affordability. We assume two things about the people we want to contact. One is that, especially if they're from the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, when it comes to the Left or vaguely progressive spaces in general, voting is all people know. And two, the working class is struggling. Those are two realities. I agree broadly with what was said before: capitalism is going to try to sabotage both reformist reforms and non-reformist reforms. But more importantly, we're seeing the complete collapse of basic quality of life in New York. Private equity owns everything. A Palantir executive is the CEO of Partiful. They're stealing your information. Don't use Partiful. My friend made an alternative app. What is important and ideological, especially when it comes to the DSA is what it means to actually activate somebody or build class consciousness.

The fact is that accelerationism doesn't work. Dan listed the 10 pivotal crises in the last 50 years, all of which were capitalized on by people who were often accelerationists, who said COVID is going to make some kind of ground-swelling movement, and that the BLM movement is going to be a ground-swelling movement where we see large amounts of resistance and direct action. That didn't work because people, especially under the pandemic, were struggling. They couldn't get organized.

It's a disorganizing space in general. When conditions are poor in the heart of empire, we can't get organized and build powerful resistance, whether that is a party or a proto-party formation, or organizing around identity-based issues and issue-based campaigns.

Zohran Mamdani is not bringing about the revolution. Zohran is not actually a socialist. When we talk about making sure that the subway is clean, it's to improve the quality of life so people can start thinking about what is beyond their exploitation, and what is beyond this weird form of ever-devolving capitalism.

Socialism requires class consciousness, and thus requires organization. When it comes to what Zohran's policies can mean for this, I disagree with certain things, especially on the stance around policing. I actually helped write the original platform about the Office of Community Safety. I wrote some of the policy around incarceration and solitary confinement, especially regarding trans folks and people with mental illnesses. Some of that is no longer being talked about in the mainstream, and some isn't being fully implemented. When we talk about alternatives to policing, we're now shifting away from whatever Zohran might say about staffing the police and apologizing because he wants to abolish the Strategic Response Group. We are talking about an alternative to the current understanding of policing. You went from broken-window policing of Rudy Giuliani to a continuation of that under Mike Bloomberg, then to de Blasio. You should look up *The NYPD Files*.[9]

What would it mean to have alternatives to policing? When it comes to what Zohran is trying to do regarding policing or housing, these aren't necessarily revolutionary ideas. A rent freeze, for example, has been done under de Blasio. The point of these reforms is to prevent the continued acceleration of black displacement, like in Brooklyn and the Bronx, and to ensure that we have viable organizing fronts where we are free from continued repression. "Isn't that the same rhetoric that we used for Kamala Harris?" Yes, but it's actually applicable this time.

I want to push back on this question of an audition for a new Democratic Party. I have a few criticisms of how Zohran and the transition team want to approach the Democratic Party, especially on accepting endorsements and saying he's willing to work with Hochul going forward. That aside, the point is not revolution. Ultimately a revolution is necessary in the U.S., but the DSA and its electoral project are not revolutionary. If somebody is willing to accept that, we can get into the meat of the discussion. If the project is not revolutionary, what is the point? The point is to have better conditions in the short-term for the working class. The DSA project also allows for other proto-party coalitions to build. The point is to be able to build enough solidarity within labor unions and local community groups, help support mutual-aid resistance, or even just direct action that can be expanded upon in the future.

What should we normalize? I'll talk a little bit about Lenin here. I love the snippet of something regarding assassination that circulated a week or two ago,[10] in which Lenin questioned direct action and individualistic opportunism.[11] To build up solidarity, you must engage with your neighbors. But there needs to be a space in which we're able to have better platforms and better grounding to build up a tenants association, a union in your workplace, etc. And that often requires, and is often just easier, with some non-reformist reforms.

I'm not here to launch a defense of Zohran, and, concerning what was raised about the Second International, I will never decry purity tests. I want to hold Zohran accountable. I worked to get him elected because it's probably the best option available to lay the groundwork for future organizing. It's not necessarily a question of whether Zohran is going to lead the revolution. In fact, he's a little egotistical; all politicians are a little weird. But if the work is being done to be able to defend some organizing capacity, it's something to commit to. Do I think that the cult of personality that's been created around Zohran is good? No; it's a natural byproduct of the current Democratic Party that we have, which should be pushed back on in future elections.

Has DSA rejected this history of pro-war sentiments? We're not asking the Republican Party if they're still abolitionists, right? Parties change, or proto-parties change. The Democratic Party is still racist, but they're not pro-Southern pride racists. This goes back to the question of what the necessity of the party backing Zohran is. For DSA, it was just the ground movement. It was the ability to mobilize people who only know electoralism, and at least introduce them to other forms of organizing. These conditions for organizing show that when we don't have a strong enough groundwork, we're not able to build it up into a mass scale that is actionable.

We're talking about Zohran in a big vacuum here. We're talking about Zohran against the world or as an actor who is going to be highlighted as the focal point of what the Left can be in the U.S. That's true in a media sense. We forget that, for example, a lot of the agenda has to come through the State House. A lot of the State Assembly members are for Zohran's agenda now: they've agreed to tax the rich, which isn't socialism. I have to repeat it. The point is that with each movement, whether we see with the Squad or BLM, a popular uprising happens that has to be capitalized upon. We can still capitalize upon this moment, whether that's mobilizing Zohran's volunteers, radicalizing them to become socialists or communists, or creating revolutionary sentiments that don't dismiss voices.

Finally, on the results: the Bronx is the one spot that was a Democratic holdout that Zohran lost. But I want to clarify something: Zohran won white, Asian, and Hispanic voters. In Harlem, he won by 10 points. In East Queens, East Brooklyn, majority black, majority Indo-Caribbean districts that were re-canvassed — and where the actual idea of a rent freeze and free buses were espoused — Zohran won. We didn't canvas much in the Bronx because we didn't have volunteers there. But in the areas that we did canvas, we won. We won among young black voters, many of whom are from New York. The Democratic Party is asking for holdouts from its base of supporters. Zohran was able to not only win some people from those demographics, but then everyone else in the Democratic Party. I will accept this criticism if Zohran loses all working class black voters, but that's not going to happen.

The way that the "the party," the coalition — whether DSA or the progressive movement behind Zohran — can actually work is a matter of mobilizing the people who didn't vote or even those who did but are still skeptical of Zohran. Zohran's isn't going to be a socialist project, but it builds the capacity to have one in the future on a mass scale; it could lead to a strike, hopefully a general strike, in 2028 across the country,[12] or an actual revolution. That will probably take decades to complete because we haven't fully radicalized the people who are either not on board with Zohran, or who are on board with him, but are

just liberals.

Melvyn Dubofsky: I should throw a little historical cold water on this discussion. The era in which municipal socialism actually existed and worked was a very different age. Before World War I there were over 1,000 cities in the U.S. that had fully or partially socialist municipal administrations, the most famous case being Milwaukee. New York City had a powerful socialist movement. But all this was linked to what amounted to a rising labor movement. Milwaukee socialism was based on Milwaukee unions. In New York, socialism largely derived from the garment-workers unions, which were openly and declaredly socialist. And in the pre-WWI period, socialism seemed to be on the rise.

Was it seven decades ago now? I was doing research at the old Tamiment Library, which was not at NYU, it was at the Rand School of Social Science, 7 East 15th Street.[13] When you walked in, there was a bust of Karl Marx, Morris Hillquit, who ran for the mayor of New York on the Socialist Party ticket, and Meyer London, socialist congressman from New York. And we found hidden in the masonry the records of Branch 1 of the New York City Socialist Party. I was a young graduate student then. I was amazed when I saw the membership record of the Branch. It included almost every prominent artist and literary figure — the intellectual elite. And then, in a very strange circumstance, I found three letters of resignation from the Party clipped together. I don't know who had this particular sense of history, but the three resignations clipped together were Walter Lippmann, later a famous journalist, W. E. B. Du Bois, the most prominent African American intellectual leader of his era, and Francis Perkins, who later became Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor.

The Socialist Party before WWI was really an integral part of U.S. politics. In the Socialist Party papers, I found letters from prominent Republicans and Democrats crediting the Socialists with making major improvements. World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution ripped that apart. Socialism in the U.S. never recovered from the impact of the War and the Bolshevik Revolution, which in effect split the Left.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Reading, Pennsylvania; and Bridgeport, Connecticut all remained socialist cities in the 1920s–50s. Milwaukee, from the time the socialists took over the city into the 50s, built a reputation as the healthiest city in the country. Going back to before WWI, it provided medical care and services for its poorest citizens, inoculations and milk for its children, and it built a marvelous park system. Socialism could offer particular benefits. But socialism in a single city could not change the larger environment. New York City from the 1930s through the 50s in a way repeated what Milwaukee did. Fiorello LaGuardia, the mayor in the 30s and 40s, came out of the New York City labor and socialist milieu of the Pre-WWI period. He took advantage of the money that the Roosevelt administration poured into the city. He could only do it because New Deal Democrats were in power in Washington. And with Robert Moses, his master builder, they put beautiful parks throughout the city in working-class neighborhoods. I grew up in that city. Two of the municipal colleges were direct beneficiaries of the New Deal and LaGuardia: Brooklyn College and Queens College; both built with New Deal money. New York built municipal housing that worked. The projects originally had a majority-white residential population, mostly fully employed workers. There was great improvement in their living conditions.

During and after World War II, we had what economic historians call the great contraction, when inequality reached what could be called its lowest point. It was a period in which one third of the labor force was unionized. And that unionized third enabled enormous numbers of non-union workers to receive the same betterments. It was a remarkable period. It seems inconceivable today. When I grew up, you could walk to a municipal park that had beautiful baseball fields, basketball courts, softball fields, an enormous swimming pool, diving pool, in a working-class neighborhood. For five cents you could ride the subway. For 25 cents with your high school card you could walk into Madison Square Garden — it was on 8th Avenue between 49th and 50th Street back then — and see a professional basketball or hockey game. Or you could turn up the same day at the old polo grounds — no luxury boxes in those days — and see the New York Giants play football. It was a different city than today. As the historian of that city, Josh Freeman, has noted, it was basically a form of municipal socialism. *Nothing* like today.

I suspect that Mamdani will win the election. But he will not be a LaGuardia. LaGuardia would not have been who he was without the New Deal in power in Washington. I really don't know what Mamdani can accomplish when there will be no support from Trump's Washington. It is going to be extremely difficult. Just 30 or 40 years ago, unions were stronger; they had money. Look at some of the great housing in the city. The Amalgamated Housing Cooperative in the Bronx; Stuyvesant Town on the Lower East Side; the huge development in Brighton Beach in Brooklyn: all built largely with union money. It's not available today. It's just a different world.

Look elsewhere and it seems equally bleak. Back in the 80s I was involved in a joint U.S.-Soviet academic exchange program. The Soviets came here three times, and we went there three times. The first two times we went there, in 81 and 85, it was bleak. We met nothing but apparatchiks. The last time in 87, it was post-Gorbachev. It was literally a new world. And the amazing thing is that what the Gorbachev people wanted to do in the Soviet Union was to recreate what the French called the glorious 30 years: 1945–75. They wanted to build a form of Soviet — how else to put it? — social democracy. The failure of Gorbachev was a great tragedy.

I don't know where we go from Mamdani's likely victory in November into the future. And I do not really believe that workers without a college education were necessarily conservative voters. The problem is that few of them are in unions today. New York has more proportionately union members than most places, but it is still a relatively small minority and it is basically public employees. Take away the teachers, the municipal employees, and how many union members still exist in the city of New York? And without unions to have educational and political programs, workers drift politically and are isolated. Organize them, and things change. But it's difficult to organize today, because fundamentally the law, as it exists and as it functions, undermines unions. I don't know where you go from one social democrat in power in one city. As Trotsky used to argue: you could not have socialism or communism in one country; you had to have a global revolution. Socialism can't survive in one city. Even so, I hate to throw all this cold water on it. But then, I've lived too long, so I don't have much of a future.

Responses

MC: We have to start building now. We have to start raising all different kinds of issues, like environmental issues: no pesticides, no GMOs, no gain-of-function research, no corporate pollution and dumping. How do such organizing efforts happen under attack from, yes, fascists and yes, Trump, and yes, others in Israel? How can we build that core now that can resist the coming attacks? Who can focus on the corporate, capitalist structure? Who can go after the banks? Can Zohran, or any one individual, help facilitate that now? It's needed now, not tomorrow. There is no tomorrow. There is only now.

DL: No gain-of-function research?

MC: Absolutely.

DL: So you're joining the anti-science bandwagon of the Trump administration? And you want to build a socialist movement?

MC: Absolutely, the Trump administration are not the only ones who criticize this.

DL: I'm the only optimist on this table. There is a great revolutionary potential in America. America has a 238 year-old constitution, which is in absolute ruins. What little is left of it is being overturned. It is completely dysfunctional. That's why Trump is in power, because we have had 30 years of gridlock. We have a Senate which is grossly imbalanced, a gerrymandered House, a Supreme Court which is both super reactionary and absolutely unchangeable, and we have an Electoral College which is geared heavily to white, rural states. That has got to change. The system is falling apart. A certain point will come when America will have to reconstitute itself and throw out this 18th–century constitution. That will be a revolutionary act. America will be where France was in 1789 or where Russia was in 1917 when they convened a constituents' assembly.

America is facing a period of fundamental change: either dictatorship under Trump or revolutionary reconstitution by the working class. When the global hegemon reaches this kind of point, the options are wide open. Things look grim and options seem limited, but that can change dramatically: 1789, 1917, and the 2020s. America is a country at an absolute impasse and impasses don't last forever. They can be shattered, and when they are shattered, extraordinary things can happen.

SLM: Optimism is different from understanding that our organizing base is wholly unprepared for any type of monumental change. We see that in LA, where there was resistance, but the national guard still came in, the governor and the mayor didn't do anything, and there was nothing productive to come out of it. There was no long-term or even short-term base-building that came out of it, apart from actual direct-action resistance, which I think was good and necessary, but is better done in LA than in DC, for example. It shows that — as socialists or even in the broad progressive movement that we hope are allied with us — we are unprepared.

When conditions are a bit better, it's easier to organize and politicize people. I hear revolutionary optimism that something will happen and that we'll be prepared, and then a broader question of how will Zohran impact it away from the organizers, and how we are going to build up power. I also agree this is true, but I don't see any tangible alternatives, which is telling about our organizing at this juncture.

MD: Things are bad, and it's hard to see the promise of something better on the horizon. To say "the worse, the better" — I don't think that's ever worked for the better. The biggest impetus for change in the last two centuries has been war. I don't think we want war in the future. Things have simply gotten much worse. 50 years ago, I spent a year in Israel teaching. The kind of reality that exists there today was not there back then. Netanyahu comes from what 50 years ago was the minority sector of Likud. To put it as bluntly as possible, he comes out of a fascist tradition. That was a small minority in Israel fifty years ago. Today, in some respects, it is dominant. We can all see the results. I've just lived too long, and I'm not ready to end my days with a Trumpian nation.

Q&A

I'm a reader of Worker's Vanguard *and* Spartacist. *There's a caucus in the DSA right now called "Just Break Already" (JBA) that is calling for a clean break now. You say Mamdani is not a socialist, so why don't you throw him out of the DSA? It's still like August 4, 1914 for the DSA.*[14] *At the last DSA conference there was a motion to censure Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez because she was not hard enough on Zionism. We need Leninism and Trotskyism. The JBA is entering the DSA the way that the Trotskyists in the U.S. entered the Socialist Party. If Mamdani wants to stay in the DSA, he should refuse all funding and break with the Democratic Party.*

SLM: I hate DSA internal politics; I hate internal politics in general; I am not a partisan person. I do a lot of hard-skills training, and work on the ground with tenants' associations and unions. JBA and internal DSA politics are separate from what the Zohran campaign is, for better or worse. The DSA has passed an anti-Zionist resolution, DSA national has un-endorsed Ocasio-Cortez along with Jamaal Bowman, and there are internal resolutions seeking how to hold Zohran accountable through party mechanisms. Why run Zohran at all if he is not a socialist? Because you can't govern as a socialist right now.

Can Zohran use state power to build the kind of movement and organizations we need? Can you use the state to create a socialist base or does it happen the other way around?

SLM: Supporting a socialist base isn't different from the ground swell needed to create it. A socialist or communist movement wouldn't require that there is a first a socialist or communist president. On the policy side, New York is a weak home-rule state, which means most of the power belongs to the state government, not the city governments, which means the only person with real power in New York City is the mayor; he controls the budgeting, which is why Zohran wanted to run for mayor.

At the theoretical level, we can see the mayor and Tammany Hall almost a century ago were able to prop up the ethnic enclaves of New York City. It is not a politicization of working-class communities, but it does demonstrate how the coalitions that back someone in power in New York City can help push working-class folks towards unions, stronger community associations, tenants' associations, etc.

DL: But, Sebastian, you're contradicting yourself; you said that Mamdani is not a socialist. So how will electing a non-socialist build socialism?

SLM: Mamdani is a socialist personally, but he is not able to *govern* as a socialist. But I think one can use mayoral power to have these reforms to create better conditions for organizing, or even just not cracking down on protests, and actually helping radicalize folks. There isn't a substantive difference between how socialists and non-socialists interact at the ground level.

DL: It seems to me that Mamdani, if he were a socialist, would be mobilizing the working-class against the impending Trump assault, because if Mamdani gets elected Trump is gonna come down on New York like a ton of bricks. And he'd be mobilizing the working-class to fight that off, and he's not; he is conferring with Kathy Hochul, seeking her support.

MD: You can't create socialism from the top down. It's reciprocal. You need a base below too. The base and — call it the superstructure if you want — have to build each other up. In the early 20th century, it was local socialist groupings and trade unions that built up the strength of socialism. It didn't arise from officials being elected here or there and building a following. It came, mostly, from below. When the forces below brought leaders into power, those leaders had to work to try to enlarge the mass below. We're in a different situation today. Mamdani can make improvements in the city, but that's not going to have much of an impact for socialism in the larger regional or national sphere.

The DSA is absolutely not a continuation of the Second International. What Mamdani's already achieved by winning the primary is that he swept aside the last surviving rickety scaffolding of the pre-Vietnam Democratic Party, of the world of Melvyn's youth that he spoke of so eloquently, and I don't want to go back to that world. There is something entirely new that can be built. Sewer socialism in the 21st century would look different from sewer socialism in the 20th century.

I am surprised that the pro-Palestinian protests have not come up. Many who partook in these protests have now liquidated themselves into the Mamdani campaign. From the beginning, there was the question of whether it's a Leftist protest or not. Many attendees thought that the protests didn't have anything to do with Leftism, but it was an opportunity to engage people to have an interest in socialism. Now, a year or two later, no one is really talking about the Palestinian question anymore, and people are backing Mamdani. Now we hear Mamdani doesn't really have anything to do with socialism, but will maybe be beneficial to the working class. If the goal is just to improve material conditions for the working class, why shouldn't Mamdani align with Trump? Why shouldn't we encourage Mamdani to align with Trump and use the 2025 New Deal money to build or rebuild New York?

MC: I have been involved for a long time with social movements that raised the question of Palestine for 40 years, and they were always ignored, or shot down, or refused by liberals, social democrats, and also other Marxist parties. I agree that Mamdani raising this issue in New York City is important. But, can that translate into ongoing activity and ongoing structures?

DL: The Palestinian movement has died, but the war has not stopped. The devastation in Gaza is intensifying, and Netanyahu is moving to the final stage, where he is leveling Gaza City, herding the entire population far to the south where they will be in concentration-camp-like conditions at best, if they are not expelled en masse. It's heading for the climax. Trump, much to Netanyahu's delight, talks freely about a massive ethnic cleansing of the population in Gaza. Yet the movement has died. I have written about this for the *Platypus Review*,[15] and I made myself fairly unpopular by saying that the problem with the movement is that it didn't grapple with the Hamas problem; Hamas is a far-Right movement which the pro-Palestinian movement tried to pretend didn't exist. The consequences for the movement were disastrous, and they're disastrous for the Palestinian people. I know you are being provocative with the question of aligning with Trump.

Why not?

DL: Because Trump is not going to create wealth. Trump is leading to the accelerating impoverishment of American society. It'll be to the benefit of a tiny elite, but for the working class there is nothing but regression under Trump: democratically, economically, culturally, medically. Trump is a disaster for the workers, so we can't align with Trump. We clearly have to oppose Trumpism, but we have to oppose the system that gave rise to Trump. That is the important thing, because if you elect Democrats in 2026 or 28, we'll just be back to where we were under Biden, and things will fall apart again, and there will be another Trump waiting in the wings.

We have discussed sewer socialism and its relation to the Socialist Party in Milwaukee. The question of the police is crucial in thinking through both Zohran's working with and tacit support of the police, and the Milwaukee socialist's relationship with the police — establishing a new police chieftain — and the ways that created real problems for that moment. Sebastian treats the police as one amongst a plurality of issues, when the question of the police undergirds the whole struggle; the whole struggle for social reforms will be a struggle against the police.

DL: About the cops, I disagree with you; the cops are an end-of-the-pipeline problem. The structures of America are so profoundly un-democratic and racist, and that is what generates police brutality; not the reverse.

MD: I want to leave you with an Antonio Gramsci aphorism: "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."

Mitchel you made an argument that we need to go beyond the forms of the Second International, and that the Second International is in part responsible for the DSA we have today. But, Melvyn seemed to make almost the reverse argument, that there were greater, broader forms of working-class organization during the Second International than there have ever been since it split around WWI and the 1917 revolution.

DL: The Second International had a spotty-at-best record on racism; one of the best-selling SPA pamphlets in the U.S. came out in 1914, and it was a blast against workplace integration. The pamphlet said it was horrible that bosses were making white and black workers drink from the same ladle, and demanded working-class action to stop it. Unions were widely segregated. Eugene V. Debs was personally a very humane individual who wrote very eloquently on the race question, but Debs, as you know, was a passivist; he did not believe that there was any special role for the SPA in combatting racism.[16] So we can't romanticize the SPA, and it's the failure to deal with that problem that eventually led to the destruction of the Left, and so you can't look back to that golden age.

MC: The Second International was challenged on the question of war, and all these socialist party leadership honchos were supporting WWI. Dan said they were doing that partly because their own membership would have lynched them. Things change over a matter of weeks, and they did in August of 1914.

What is the role of the state? Should socialists be able to criticize the state? Dan, is a certain criticism of the state excluded because Trump is also making that criticism? What would a Leftist critique of the state be? How does this relate to Mamdani, who is straight-forwardly saying, "you need the state" and "the whole point is to have a bigger state." What do socialists make of that?

DL: Obviously we want to overthrow the capitalist state. We want to replace it with a socialist state, a powerful democratic socialist state which will mobilize the working class to rebuild their society. I just read Trotsky's *Communism and Terrorism*, and he discusses with remarkable frankness the creation of a socialist superstate — the state reaching its crescendo. Certainly, that is the kind of state we have to build, but it has got to be as democratic as it is sovereign and powerful.

MC: I just don't agree on that. It's the workers ourselves who create the new society, and we need the state under socialists to help facilitate that process, bolster it, and create the communication links where needed. It's the workers ourselves, who, through our direct action, accomplish the creation of socialism, not the state. We fight against the capitalist state, and the state itself as the embodiment of the capitalist class. **|P**

Transcribed by Benjamin Kay, Erin Hagood, and Athene McQueen

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[1] Available online at <https://youtu.be/8lrl-7qua70>.

[2] See the scene in *On the Waterfront*, <https://youtu.be/IYBAPVjJykY>.

[3] See V. I. Lenin, "The Draft Resolution of the Left Wing at Zimmerwald" (1915), in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 21 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 345–48, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/aug/20.htm>

[4] Chris Gilbert and Cira Pascual Marquina, "A Special Issue on Communes in Socialist Construction," *Monthly Review* 77, no. 3 (July–August 2025), <https://monthlyreview.org/articles/a-special-issue-on-communes-in-socialist-construction>.

[5] See, for example, former SYRIZA economic advisor John Milios's article "The Greek Left tradition and the SYRIZA phenomenon," *Platypus Review* 86 (May 2016), <https://platypus1917.org/2016/05/03/greek-left-tradition-syriza-phenomenon>.

[6] The English Defense League was founded in 2009 and was active until the late 2010s. It opposed radical Islamism in England.

[7] Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists mounted mass demonstrations during the 1930s.

[8] The Strategic Response Group is a unit of the New York City Police Department formed in 2015, responsible for counter-terrorism, riot control, and other operations.

[9] See *The NYPD Files*, *ProPublica*, <https://www.propublica.org/series/the-nypd-files>.

[10] The topic of assassination was being widely discussed because Charlie Kirk had been assassinated on September 10, 2025.

[11] See V.I. Lenin, "Revolutionary Adventurism" (1902), in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 6 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 186–207, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1902/sep/01.htm>.

[Endnotes 12–16 available online]

could be said to have produced its own opposite, the opposite of what had been intended by the revolt of the Third Estate: a new class society, perhaps the perfection of the class domination that had always existed in some form and as potential. Bourgeois society thus convicts itself as being the last form of human prehistory.

The self-dissolution of bourgeois society in capitalism embodied by the proletariat bears emancipatory potential, points beyond class society, beyond labor as a social relation, and therefore not simply beyond capitalism in the way that bourgeois society emerged from out of traditional civilization. Capitalism has come to point beyond prehistory, i.e., beyond class society, towards history proper: human destiny consciously driven by humanity, socialized as we are already compelled to be by capitalism.

It was recognized by Marx and the best Marxists that the politically organized proletariat would have to fulfil — positively realize — and negate capitalism, and itself, as the negation of bourgeois society and therefore of all prior prehistory. For instance, the expropriation of the means of production by the proletariat would be a part of the simultaneous realization and abolition — *Selbstaufhebung*[9] — of itself as a commodity, at first by being able to set the terms of the sale of its labor, and later by transcending the exchange principle through fulfilling it in the expropriation of capital. If capitalism represents the conditions of possibility for socialism, this includes the existence of the proletariat as the bearer of that possibility.

Marxism meanwhile saw itself as the bearer of the historical consciousness of the proletariat, as itself a necessary ingredient in this dynamic, and could trace the history of its movement back through the Industrial Revolution to the days of the utopians. For Marxism, as best described by Lenin,[10] the working class in itself unconsciously enacts the negation of bourgeois society and imposes the necessity of socialism, but the spontaneous consciousness of its historical-political task only goes so far. The workers' movement stood in need of leadership by the advanced guard of the proletariat to safeguard historical class consciousness and to bring about the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Bonapartism and the dictatorship of the proletariat

The crisis in society once exemplified by the class struggle between capitalists and proletarians came to necessitate state intervention. The state as envisaged by the likes of Jean-Jacques Rousseau was to be the guarantor of civil liberties and the general will, meaning the preservation of society, through which freedoms beyond natural liberty are acquired. The general will is not the accumulation of all the individual wills in society, or a happy medium of all those wills, but the will of society itself to survive and preserve the freedom of individual subjects.

The state stepping into the fray during the crisis of society in the mid-19th century, while a regression in terms of the horizon of possibility for society, was also a product of that society's simultaneous need to preserve and transcend itself. It can be seen as the self-contradiction and disintegration of the general will insofar as real bourgeois liberties were sacrificed for the sake of their formal preservation.

In his 1891 postscript to *The Civil War in France*, Engels describes the change that had taken place in the bourgeois form of the state:

> Society had created its own organs to look after its common interests, originally through simple division of labor. But these organs, at whose head was the state power, had in the course of time, in pursuance of their own special interests, transformed themselves from the servants of society into the masters of society, as can be seen . . . not only in the hereditary monarchy, but equally also in the democratic republic.[11]

This transformation of the state was described by Marx and Marxism therefore as "Bonapartism," after the rule of the Second Empire by Louis Bonaparte, Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon I. The task of Bonapartism was to mediate and find compromise between the two warring classes — and, ultimately, to put down the proletariat in any uprising, thus ensuring the preservation of bourgeois society in capitalist form. To put it in a playfully dialectical way: in becoming more bourgeois, in becoming itself, society negated itself, became less bourgeois, in capitalism. Capitalism is statism, and Bonapartism "was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation."[12]

Just as, for Marxism, socialism is the dialectical opposite of capitalism, so the dictatorship of the proletariat conceived in contradistinction to the Bonapartist form of rule is best understood as its dialectical opposite. Both the Bonapartist state and the dictatorship of the proletariat emerge under the compulsion of a necessity issuing from the crisis of society. Thus, the dictatorship of the proletariat can be understood as both a regression from the horizon of bourgeois emancipation insofar as it has a necessarily authoritarian aspect, while also far outstripping that horizon.

Bonapartism answers this same necessity, but can be described as the Right wing of this tendency: it acts only to preserve what is, not to realize what ought to be. For Leszek Kołakowski, what separates Left from Right is not progress versus reaction; rather, the Left seeks to make good on new possibilities — and in so doing, the idea of a utopia becomes itself a tool — while the Right seeks to conserve what already exists, foreclosing further possibilities.[13]

The horizon of possibility for this society had regressed under the domination of capital. The bourgeoisie had retreated under the coattails of Louis Napoleon. It was left to the workers' movement for socialism, the Left, to take up the cause of freedom, to carry through the revolution begun by the revolt of the Third Estate, whose secret *telos*[14] is proletarian revolution. The bourgeois state in Bonapartist form no longer presents the possibility of its eventual withering away, but resigns itself to the continued need for the power of the state over society, the continued need for the governing of people, rather than, as in the case of the dictatorship of the proletariat, setting its sights on consigning that state of affairs to the history books and existing only for the sake of the administration of things.[15]

The dictatorship of the proletariat must therefore be understood not as a permanent state of affairs in which the proletariat would install itself as a new ruling class, but, only a temporary measure used to suppress the capitalist class and secure the gains of the revolution, just as the Bonapartist state is and was used for suppressing and controlling the working class, and cementing the rule of the bourgeoisie. The existence of the dictatorship of the proletariat would mean that while capitalism still exists, the problems of capital and the state have been taken up politically. Once it could comfortably be dispensed with, the state would wither away. However, the attempt to bring about the dictatorship of the proletariat, to enact the World Revolution, failed.

Negative dialectics

Despite the political failure of Marxism, the necessity immanent to capitalism has not gone away. Only, the working class no longer has nothing to lose but its chains. Because it could not be positively realized in socialism, the tendency towards immiseration, for example, has had to be circumvented by extra-economic measures undertaken by the Bonapartist state as a part of the integration of the proletariat into capitalism, and therefore the attempted neutralization of the threat it once posed.[16]

The resultant disappearance of the understanding of class as a political category — really, the disappearance of the proletariat as a class for itself, that is, a politically-organized class, while it still exists in itself as a social class — has rendered the Marxist understanding of the proletariat less and less lucid, such that many on the "Left" today are wont to reduce the question of social class to a question of rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots, or of the 99% and the 1%, to use the language of the Occupy movement, a high point of the Millennial Left.

Far from progress, from having left Marxism behind by transcending it, we have continued to fall further below its understanding of the necessity of socialism that capitalism is. We are not in an 1848 moment, let alone a 1917 moment. Regression has long been a problem for Marxism.

The Marxist understanding of the internal dynamic of capitalism that Marx describes as "a dynamic relationship driving towards resolution," has therefore been problematized by Marxism's failure as a political project and the subsequent retrogression of society and the regression of the Left.

For Marx and the best Marxists, who had an active, ascendant mass workers' movement to deal with, who enjoyed the tangible possibility of the political victory of the workers, this social dynamic, driven by the workers' movement, seemed to be driving towards socialism. Capitalism seemed to be actively driving beyond itself in the form of the self-conscious subject-object of history, the proletariat. The Marxists of the past, those belonging to Marxism as a political project during the mid-to-late-19th century and into the early part of the 20th, could, in a sense, be more Hegelian than we are allowed to be. While they maintained that the dialectic itself, rather than being identical with progress, had come to point beyond itself, proletarian revolution could still be understood to have arisen out of the dialectic of capitalism.

The "sharpening of the contradictions" to which ostensible "Marxists" today still love to refer was not the automatic "progress" of capitalism, where "progress" may be understood merely as a function of the passage of time, as an inevitability. Nor did it consist in the "acceleration" of this apparently automatic process, even where this process is equated with the disintegration of capitalism. Rather, the act of sharpening the contradictions was understood to be the effect of the revolutionary activity of the workers' movement.

Absent class consciousness, the process may persist, but without the contradictions being adequately sharpened, and so not coming to consciousness. Capitalism continues to negate itself, compel socialization, abolish private property, and undermine the bourgeois nation state without these things being realized politically. Absent the workers' movement for socialism, the same energy that would be driven into transcending capitalism is instead channeled into reproducing it.

Marxism had failed by around 1919 with the murder of the communists Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht during the German Revolution, at the hands of the Freikorps and under the orders of the then-ruling Social Democratic Party of Germany, of which they had been an integral part prior to the Party's vote for war credits. It is this uprising that the critical theorist and friend and teacher to Adorno, Walter Benjamin, credits as being the last gasp of the revolution, the last gasp of the truly historical consciousness embodied by Marxism. Soon after came a regression, a reification of the concept of "progress" that proved fatal. Benjamin writes:

> In the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing. It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an "ideal" that the trouble began. The ideal was defined in Neo-Kantian doctrine as an "infinite [*unendlich*] task." And this doctrine was the school of philosophy of the Social Democratic party. Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogeneous time was transformed into an anteroom . . . in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity. In reality, there is not a moment that would not carry with it *its* revolutionary chance — provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new problem [*Aufgabe*]. For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation. But it is equally grounded . . . in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-à-vis a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked. The entrance into this chamber coincides in a strict sense with political action, and it is by means of such entry that political action . . . reveals itself as messianic. (Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption.) . . . Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps . . . revolutions are an attempt by the passengers . . . to activate the emergency brake."[17]

In these apparent deviations from orthodox Marxism — Benjamin claimed to be an orthodox Marxist — lies the key to recognizing what separates our time from Marx's, what necessitates the intervention of the likes of Adorno and his thesis of negative dialectics: what becomes of the dialectic of capitalism absent the workers' movement for socialism. It is the dialectic itself having become implicated in the wake of that failure, necessitating the dialectical critique of itself, the Marxist critique of Marxism.

The progress that was to result in a successful World Revolution for socialism, after the failure of that movement, regressed into being the continued "progress" of capitalism, its continued self-negation and reconstitution. This is what Benjamin describes as "progression through homogeneous, empty time," the progress and apparent eternity of prehistory, and the regression of the struggle for emancipation. It is this that Benjamin is referring to when he describes the interruption of historical progress — in the name of genuine progress. The point is no longer to "progress" history, to submit to its dynamic, but to throw on the brakes.

The meaning Marx and Engels gave to this dynamic is something we no longer have the luxury of falling back on. Progress itself had become regressive, and it is the failure of Marxism that produced this condition we have yet to find a way out of.[18] Bourgeois society has undergone a retrogression, in capitalism, to a premodern temporality, the temporal experience of the cyclical. It remains "the old in distress," as Adorno puts it, "in its hour of need," without its historical character being evident.[19] The present is ahistorical in its immediacy, has forgotten its own historical character — a forgetfulness that is itself historical.

Society disintegrates under the dead weight of historical potential that is not being realized, and the state is compelled more and more to intervene. Progress can no longer be equated, as in Hegel, with the dialectic itself. The progress of capitalism has shown itself to be the blind transience of the nature it thought it was the process of leaving behind. Instead, genuine progress has come to lie in the possibility of the interruption of progress. As Adorno puts it in *Negative Dialectics*: "Dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction."[20]

If we understand the progressive movement of capitalism into a homogeneous future to be one that rides over and leaves as a mere fact of history the attempt to change the world, to realize possibilities we all tacitly realize are still latent today, progressivism itself appears Right-wing, conservative. Past attempts at emancipation are allotted their place in the historical continuum, and their failure is accepted at face value; the judgement of history is accepted: the Left, Marxism, socialism, emancipation, all have simply failed, forever. The Chartist movement, for instance, on which Efraim Carlebach gave a teach-in in Manchester a couple of years ago,[21] came to a dead end. Carlebach pointed out that on the huge timeline hanging on the wall of the People's History Museum in Manchester, the Chartist movement is an inconspicuous little branch off the "main" timeline that came to nought.

Therefore we cannot posit even the history of domination as some kind of cynical "meaning" of history, history as identical with itself, with its own course. Even this would be too comforting. One's theory of history is one's theory of the present;, to have a conception of the history of the Left and its failures is to have an account of how its present state came to be.

Our present world and its Left are constituted by the failure of Marxism and our continued inability to surmount that failure, often inadvertently affirming the course of history and contributing to the reconstitution of capitalism. We are products of failure. Marxism is dead, but it is not gone: it haunts us, perhaps most of all in our inability to remember it. As Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*: "The fact that history has rolled over certain positions will be respected as a verdict on their truth content only by those who agree with Schiller that "world history is the world tribunal." What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations."[22]

If capitalism remains the collective, albeit unconscious, product of the working class; if the working class produces, on a global scale, its own conditions of domination, albeit under compulsion; it still bears the responsibility, actually the only real possibility, of transforming that situation. There is still hope.

While Marxism discovered the conditions of possibility for socialism in capitalism, this must be understood to include the constitution of the industrial working class and its mass socialist movement, as well as the constitutive role it plays in capitalism. Absent this, capitalism is catastrophe. The same energy that goes into reconstituting capitalism could be used to reconstitute the workers' movement for socialism, but it isn't. The workers' movement for socialism is dead. The means of realizing capitalism's latent potential no longer exist in self-conscious, political form. Those conditions of possibility are positively decomposing. And yet, for all the failure, for all the backwardness of our own moment, for all the seeming impossibility of redemption, it nonetheless remains the case that progress is only possible through the development of "a self-conscious global subject."[23]

The task of constituting this global subject, which once took the form of the mass workers' party for socialism (and therefore was not identical with the working class in itself), remains — even if there is nobody equal to it. **|P**

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[1] The author wishes to thank Justin Spiegel.

[2] Theodor W. Adorno, "Society," in *Aspects of Sociology*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 17. Adorno quotes J. C. Bluntschli, "Gesellschaft und Gesellschaftswissenschaft," in *Deutsches Staats-Wörterbuch*, vol. 4, eds. J. C. Bluntschli and R. Brater (Stuttgart: Expedition des Staats-Wörterbuchs, 1859), 246–51.

[3] See Theodor W. Adorno, "Lecture 17," in *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 158. Adorno notes that for Hegel's philosophy of history, progress defines "the scope of what is dialectical," i.e., the dialectical movement of history itself is for Hegel identical with progress.

[4] D. L. Jacobs, "The communist ideal in Hegel and Marx: An interview with David MacGregor," *Platypus Review* 153 (February 2023), <https://platypus1917.org/2023/02/01/the-communist-ideal-in-hegel-and-marx-an-interview-with-david-macgregor/>.

[5] Adam Smith, "Of the Division of Labour," in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 13–14.

[6] See Theodor W. Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory," in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone, et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 93.

[7] Max Horkheimer, "The Authoritarian State," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 95.

[8] "Immanent dialectical critique" means measuring bourgeois society against its own concept and discovering, through its contradiction, how it points beyond itself.

[9] [German] Self-overcoming, self-completion, self-negation, etc.

[10] See V. I. Lenin, "The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social-Democrats," in *What Is To Be Done?: Burning Questions of our Movement* (1902).

[11] Friedrich Engels, "On the 20th Anniversary of the Paris Commune" (1891), in Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (1871), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/postscript.htm>.

[12] Karl Marx, "The Paris Commune," in *The Civil War in France*.

[13] Leszek Kołakowski, "The Concept of the Left," in *Towards a Marxist Humanism: Essays on the Left Today*, trans. Jane Zielonko Peel (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1969), 71–72.

[14] [Ancient Greek] End, goal, purpose, etc.

[15] Friedrich Engels, "Theoretical," in "Part III: Socialism," in *Anti-Duhring* (1877). See also Lenin quoting this in "Class Society and the State," in *The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State & the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution* (1917).

[16] See Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory," 103; and Theodor W. Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society? The Fundamental Question of the Present Structure of Society," in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, 114–15.

[17] Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940*, eds. Howard Eiland, et al., trans. Edmund Jephcott, et al. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2006), 401–02.

[18] Adorno provides an excellent illustration of this in "Lecture 18," in *History and Freedom*, 170. There he describes how the principle of the exchange of equivalents has always violated itself — one party has always received more — and that it was through this violation, this self-contradiction, that bourgeois society progressed. It is only in this way that exchange can even be a dynamic, can be productive; the pure exchange of equivalents would cancel itself out. However, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the predominance of wage labor, the socialization of labor, the production and appropriation of surplus value, etc., industrial capital — the appropriated product of industrial labor — came to dominate society itself. This is how Adorno demonstrates the point made in "Lecture 17" that progress itself is dialectical and has produced regression through the movement of progression. Self-contradiction itself, as the bearer of progress, has come to contradict itself through producing a static, barbaric condition: capitalism. Genuine progress could however take place through regression by fulfilling without violating the exchange of equivalents, once and for all, in the expropriation of capital by the proletariat. This would thus be the negation of the negation — that is, the negation of capitalism which is itself the negation of bourgeois society — and its transcendence. "Where bourgeois society satisfies the concept it cherishes of itself it knows no progress; where it knows progress it sins against its own law in which this offence is already present, and with this inequality it perpetuates the wrong that progress is supposed to transcend. This wrong, however, is also the condition of possible justice. The fulfilment of the contract of exchange, whose terms are constantly being broken, would converge with its abolition; exchange would disappear if the objects exchanged were truly equivalent. Genuine progress is not simply quite different from exchange; it would be exchange worthy of the name." From this standpoint, the regression from bourgeois society that capitalism is could be taken up as also being progress beyond it.

[19] Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory," 95.

[20] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Antagonistic Entirety," in "Introduction," in *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2003), 11. It is also important to note here that Marx too foresaw passage beyond the dialectic, even in his optimism about history. See also Hilmar Tillack's notes, which are appended to Adorno, "Lecture 13" in *History and Freedom*, 117: "in contrast to the prevailing belief that Marx had a positive view of the natural laws of society and that one needs only to obey them to obtain the possibility of the right kind of society and that one needs only to obey them to obtain the possibility of the right kind of society — in contrast to this belief, Marx wishes to get beyond them into the kingdom of freedom i.e., to escape from the notion of history as natural history." While Hegel equated progress with this dynamic itself, with the endless perfectibility of human society, Marx was optimistic about the dynamic of history insofar as that dynamic itself seemed to be passing beyond itself in the hands of the proletarian movement for socialism. Thus, Benjamin's reversal of the image of the locomotive of history is assuredly not the disagreement it may appear to be on the surface, but is entirely faithful to Marx in changed conditions.

[21] A recording of the teach-in is available at <https://archive.org/details/chartism-teach-in>.

[22] Adorno, "Relation to Left-wing Hegelianism," in *Negative Dialectics*, 144.

[23] Theodor W. Adorno, "Progress," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 144.